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## Reflection on the Special Gender Stream: 2017 Timor-Leste Studies Association Conference

Sara Niner

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The special gender stream of the 6th *Timor-Leste Studies Association* (TLSA) Conference was co-convened by Dr Sara Niner of Monash University and Theresa Tam of the National University of Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) where the conference was held over two days from 29 to 30 June 2017. This report summarizes some of the 25 presentations which represent the key issues of political participation, gender-based violence, development, and health that are crucial for the pursuit of gender justice in Timor-Leste and how the local women's movement and aligned NGOs are attempting to achieve this. Gender equality and gender relations are growing fields of research in Timor-Leste, undertaken by a mix of academics, activists, government officers, and development practitioners (Niner, 2017) that were represented at the conference. A well-documented gender inequity is evident in post-conflict Timor-Leste as is the case in most post-war societies. Women have higher levels of malnutrition and illiteracy than men and overall women earn lower salaries, receive fewer benefits and opportunities to advance in their professional careers. The 2010 National Demographic Survey reported that a third of women have experienced physical violence from a current or former husband or partner (National Statistics Directorate [NDS], 2010). However, the acceptance of gender equality as a general principle in Timor-Leste is documented, although the deeper social change required to have equal opportunities in everyday lives is a 'work in progress', as the following report shows.

Gender relations apparent in contemporary Timorese society are the result of complex political and historical circumstances. The dominance of men in Timorese history and politics, and the legacy of militarization and conflict with neighboring Indonesia during the national struggle for independence (1974-1999), are significant issues in contemporary Timorese society that pose enormous challenges for the women's movement (Niner, 2017). In the contested world of modern Timorese history, the crucial and unique role of women during the conflict has not yet been fully acknowledged and this affects women's full and active participation in society today. Timorese women accepted that the struggle for women's rights established in the early 1970s was not possible during their long war, but the struggle depended upon women's substantial contributions and sacrifices therefore creating a pool of highly skilled and motivated women who no longer accepted the status quo. The post-conflict period has been significant for women and the struggle for gender justice in Timor-Leste. While women face cultural and political pressure to conform to patriarchal demands, after the war ended, key women leaders and women's groups have resisted this and the conference papers discussed here are evidence of that.

The opening panel, which set the agenda for the rest of the gender stream, sketched out the key political issues for women and gender relations in contemporary Timor-Leste. The panel was opened by Maria ‘Micato’ Domingas Fernandes Alves, a senior woman representative of Timor’s nationalist struggle, who provided a historical perspective on the women’s movement. As the Portuguese news agency *LUSA* reported: “Experts considered today that violence against Timorese women remains high, with patriarchal society that perpetuates gender inequality and prevents women from having access to development opportunities” (*LUSA*, 2017). ‘Micato’ Alves was only a teenager when Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and she worked behind the front lines training resistance cadres with the first East Timorese women’s organization, the Popular Organization of Timorese Women (*Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense* – OPMT), which was founded as part of the *Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor* (FRETILIN). She went on to resist Indonesian occupation in many ways and was a founder of the first women’s NGO in Timor *FOKUPERS* (celebrating its 20th Anniversary in 2017).<sup>1</sup> The ongoing discrimination and inequality faced by Timorese women from Portuguese colonization to OPMT’s efforts during the Indonesian occupation was highlighted in her paper but her major focus was on women’s contemporary solidarity and advocacy, including the establishment of the women’s network, REDE FETO Timor-Leste in 2000, and the strategic successes of the women’s movement.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these issues were reiterated by the next speaker, Nurima Alkatiri (who was running for parliament with FRETILIN) focusing on the “high prevalence of violence against women and children, chronic malnutrition, one of the highest birth rates in the world, high rates of maternal and child mortality and low rates of women participation in the work force”. She explained how “violence against children is seen as a parenting educational mechanism, and marital rape is not even understood as a concept.” She advocated for increased programs for survivors of violence and the establishment of a new mindset that does “not accept violence and gender inequality as normal” (Alkatiri, 2017). The youngest member of the panel Berta Tilman, who had recently established, Timor’s first Feminist Network, spoke about how women are marginalized from the process of national development, giving the example of the inadequacy of programs such as the *Bolsa da Mae* (Mother’s Purse). The USD 5 per month provided per child to poor, often female headed households (about USD 9 million in total in the annual budget) was too little to shift families out of poverty, as compared to the approximately USD 100 million spent per annum on projects for war veterans. Tilman presented a graph demonstrating how public funds spent on government vehicle maintenance outweighs money invested in human resources. Evelina Inan and Mira Fonseca from local women’s NGO the Alola Foundation,

1 After national independence, Micato Alves became the advisor on gender to the Prime Minister and established the national *Office of the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality* (SEPI) which produced several significant texts on women’s participation in the independence struggle. She became Minister for Social Solidarity but her next appointment as Minister of Defense in 2012 was rejected by the Commander of the national army.

2 These were gender equity instruments/mechanisms recognised in the constitution, CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 ratification, 2010 Domestic Violence Law, the National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence, women’s formal political participation ensured by quota system and most recently, the introduction of the social welfare payment for poor, often female headed households, the *Bolsa da Mae*.

continued with more positive research undertaken on 'Women and Leadership', giving suggestions on how to increase women's participation in *suco* (local council) leadership, through training. This research was deliberately driven and conducted by Timorese women, active as co-researchers, process designers and informants ensuring contextual and cultural relevance while building research skills and ensuring 'ownership' over the findings.

While the East Timorese women's movement has been highly successful at achieving strategic aims (such as the laws and quotas mentioned by Micato Alves), meeting the basic needs of women has not been as successful, particularly for poor rural women. Several presentations showed the complex challenges to improving rural women's health and wellbeing and how entrenched customary practices might be addressed. Roumaldo Amaral and Domingos Aquino Brandao of *HAIM Health* discussed increasing nutrition and empowering rural women through cultivation and consumption of the new 'superfood' moringa and Joana Gusmão and Sherry Ryan discussed how the Timorese NGO *Empreza Di'ak* (good enterprise) is reviving cultural traditions with rural women to develop livelihoods in a culturally safe way. Conference co-convenor Therese Tam of UNTL analyzed the challenges of introducing and adopting healthier and more environmentally friendly stoves in the face of adherence to the customary practice of cooking over wood burning fires which have added benefits of warmth, repelling insects and integration with a local belief system. Although the women cooks might want to adopt technology because it would lessen their work burden, along with added health benefits, this significant household purchase also requires the family support of husbands and mothers who may not appreciate these benefits.

High population growth and fertility rates in Timor-Leste are linked to high rates of child and maternal mortality, making this a key issue in improving women's status and several presentations offered insights into these challenges. Laura Burke interrogated local understandings of reproduction and how they intersected with national and international perceptions about population growth. While big families were viewed positively as assets that increased household productivity and agricultural production, rapid population growth was also a reaction to the loss of life during the war and as a way to maintain knowledge systems and create a pool of good citizens for future national development. These deep insights will assist more broadly but a more pragmatic approach proffered was Health Alliance International's *Liga Inan* (connecting mothers) program which uses SMS technology to lower mortality rates by increasing safe birthing practices and post-natal visits. Ruben Lopes, Olinda Baptista, and Sarah Meyanathan reported that while the program was associated with these positive behavior changes, other key practices and powerful cultural beliefs had remained unchanged demonstrating the limitations of the methodology and the need for deeper understanding.

The other key issue to improving women's status is reversing the high prevalence of domestic violence. Brett Inder and Amy Duong's statistical modelling of national survey data (NDS, 2010) revealed the links between violence and men's behavior described in survey responses. Men who displayed controlling behaviors and patriarchal beliefs were significantly more likely to perpetrate domestic violence, while women who accepted domestic violence were more likely to experience it. These insights were clearly linked to other findings in the gender stream. Xian Warner, Justino

Sarmiento Amaral, and Tamara Failor also presented a re-analysis of data from the *Nabilan* (to shine) survey (Asia Foundation, 2016). Clear and distinct links were found between both the experience and perpetration of violence and poor mental health such as depression and suicide. Increasing awareness of these links along with campaigns to reduce mental health stigma and 'promote non-violent ways of being a man and reduce social acceptability of men's use of violence' were suggested. A more pragmatic solution to assisting victims was presented by Guilhermina de Araujo and Livio da Conceicao Matos, from the Midwifery Department at UNTL, and Australian academic Kayli Wild, who addressed the socio-cultural context for midwives responding to violence against women in clinical settings. Although midwives offered their clients 'security from below' they themselves needed greater support to deal with the tensions between ensuring victims' rights and respecting families. Midwives suggested they needed a 'whole health facility' approach encompassing training, strong leadership, and links to communities integrated into the undergraduate health curriculum at UNTL and Ministry of Health policy.

However, the most penetrating insights into the culture surrounding gendered violence in Timor was provided from the qualitative research by Deborah Cummins and Mira Fonseca who reported on the experiences and understandings of young teenage mothers. From these narratives, the researchers concluded that young women have a lack of knowledge, choice, and agency in first sexual experiences leading to sexual abuse, unplanned pregnancies, and unhappy marriages. They found the concept of consent largely absent, with some young women unaware that their consent was even required. The acceptance of forced sex has also been found in previous studies (Asia Foundation, 2016; Niner, Wigglesworth, dos Santos, Tilman, & Arunchalam, 2013). The rights of the less powerful was another issue reported on by Anna Yang who sketched out the high rates of child abuse (over 70% for both men and women) and presented two case studies of extreme physical abuse and neglect. The vulnerability of children in informal adoption arrangements and the powerlessness of NGO's to protect the children while encountering the obstruction of government officials is a reminder of the patriarchal hierarchies of power within institutional settings that must be challenged if vulnerable people including children and women are to be protected in Timorese society. An informal discussion followed about other contexts of child abuse in Timor beyond the family, such as in schools, churches, and clubs which is another area in need of much more attention.

A general observation from the conference from both Timorese and international participants was that it provided a safe, secular space for intellectual discussions about challenging issues. The issues of gender relations discussed were crucial ones for peace, democracy, and equality in the new nation, particularly in the middle of an election campaign. TLSA has held a bi-annual conference in Dili since 2007 and many Timorese have taken up the opportunity to present at an international conference for the first time. Conference panels are presented in a mix of Timor-Leste's two national languages Tetun and Portuguese, and also in English and Bahasa Indonesian. The outcomes of the conference include peer reviewed published proceedings. This body of work now provides an archive of research material on Timor-Leste for use by all and it is freely available on their website (as below) and these proceedings are due out early 2018. The *Timor-Leste Studies Association* was established in Melbourne, Austral-

ia in 2005 to provide a network for academic researchers interested in Timor-Leste and is affiliated with the *Asian Studies Association* of Australia. For more information please visit <http://www.tlstudies.org/> and for the full 2017 Program and abstracts please visit: <http://www.tlstudies.org/Conference.html/>



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